

CHAPTER-II

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Arnold was a poet as well as a critic. Like most of the great poets, he had a theory of poetry. Arnold's theory of poetry can be gathered from his "Essays in Criticism"; 'preface to the poems of 1853 and 1857' and his 'Essays on Translating Homer'. Like the prefaces of Dryden and Wordsworth, Arnold's prefaces also contain true observations. Dryden's criticism is embodied in the prefaces, epilogues and letters of dedication which he fixed to his poetic and dramatic works. These prefaces and dedications are valuable because they are in the nature of self-justifications and contain expositions of his theory and practice of poetry. Like Dryden, Wordsworth's criticism consists of 'Advertisement to the Lyrical Ballad', 1798, 'Preface to the Lyrical Ballad', 1800, 'Preface to the Lyrical Ballad, 1802' with an appendix on poetic diction. Wordsworth's aim in writing preface was to give an elaborate account of his theory of poetry as well as to justify his new kind of poetry. In this way, it was a tradition of great English poets to express their ideas and thoughts regarding the theory of poetry in the prefaces and appendices. Matthew Arnold like Dryden and Wordsworth belongs to the tradition of

poet-critic, who gave his concepts of poetry and drama in the prefaces and essays.

'Thought and Feeling' are two important sources of poetic inspiration. The poets of the Victorian age divided themselves into two groups. One group, followed the contemporary movement in intellectual and critical thought, and pointed out the need of objectivity and endeavoured to attain the 'precision of idea'. The second group praised the idealistic notion. Emotion, love for beauty, flights of imagination coloured their poetry. This group may be labeled as the direct descendent of Romanticism - of course in a modified form Matthew Arnold belonged to the first group the intellectual group of poets. W.J.Dawson aptly comments :

He is a poet of the intellect, and his force as a poet is purely intellectual. He has no passion, no kindling flame of fervour, no heart force; he speaks from the mind to mind, and the grace and beauty of his poetry is mainly the result of intellectual art.¹

Arnold reacted against the romantic conception of 'spontaneous art'. He was an apostle of classicism. Though he could not remain completely unimaginitive and objective yet he tried his best to strike a classical balance of imagination by reason. The views expressed by Arnold regarding the theory of poetry are in general and sometimes in the nature of justification. Sometimes it seems, Arnold advocates his opinions in the prefaces and essays and turns them into

practice by writing tragedies and poetry, keeping less disparity between his theory and practice.

Arnold's Love of Poetry :

In the beginning of the 'preface to the poems of 1853, Arnold's states the reason why people love poetry
Arnold writes :

The representation of such man's feelings must be interesting, if consistently drawn. We all naturally take pleasure, says Aristotle, in any imitation or representation whatever : this is the basis of our love of Poetry : and we take pleasure in them, he adds, because all knowledge is naturally agreeable to us; not to the philosopher only, but to mankind at large. Every representation therefore, which is consistently drawn may be supposed to be interesting, inasmuch as it gratifies this natural interest in knowledge of all kinds. What is not interesting, is that which does not add to our knowledge of any kind; that which is vaguely conceived and loosely drawn; a representation which is general, indeterminate, and faint, instead of being particular, precise, and firm.

Any accurate representation may therefore, be expected to be interesting; but, if the representation be a poetical one, more than this is demanded. It is demanded, not only that it shall interest, but also that it shall inspire and rejoice the reader : that it shall convey a charm, and infuse delight. For the Muses, as Hesiod says, were born that they might be "a forgetfulness of evils, and truce from cares" : and it is not enough that the Poet should add to the knowledge of men, it is required of him also that he should add to their happiness. "All Art", says Schiller, "is dedicated to Joy, and there is no higher and no more serious problem, than how to make men happy. The right Art is that alone, which creates the highest enjoyment²."

In this way, according to Arnold, poetry is made

of imitation and the function of poetry is to add to human knowledge and joy. A mere representation of life that doesn't add to joy is not worthwhile.

When Arnold published 'The strayed Reveller', Arnold had a much different view of himself. More and more, he writes to 'K',

I feel bent against the modern English habit (too much encouraged by Wordsworth) of using poetry as a channel for thinking aloud, instead of making any thing.³

'The preface to the poems to 1853' explains his concept of poetry and its function. Carl Dawson comments :

The preface to the poems 1853 was to make this statement exploit, and after 1853 many critics were to praise Arnold for offering an alternative to the excesses of Romanticism; especially as they were manifest in Alexander Smith and other 'Spasmodic poets.'⁴

In this way unlike Romantics Arnold gives poetry a new dimension that aimed at knowledge and joy.

Stress on Action :

Arnold in his 'preface to the poems of 1853' raises the questions regarding the eternal objects of poetry and answers them firmly. He writes :

What are the eternal objects of Poetry, among all

nations and at all times? They are actions; human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves, and which are to be communicated in an interesting manner by the art of the Poet. Vainly will the latter imagine that he has everything in his own power; that he can make an intrinsically inferior action equally delightful with a more excellent one by his treatment of it; he may indeed compel us to admire his skill, but his work will possess, within itself, an incurable defect.⁵

In this way, according to Arnold, poetry of the highest order requires suitable action which are to be communicated in an interesting manner. Poetry is a an art which is dedicated to joy, and this joy results from the magnificence of action. This stress on action reminds one of Aristotle's stress^{on} fable or action, which he regards the prime thing, a ~~sole~~₅₀₄ of tragedy. Action is everything, all depends upon the choice of a right subject. Arnold is a classicist in his insistence on the importance of 'action' as the proper theme for poetry.

Arnold while speaking about the character of action, points out the necessity of great primary human affections, the elementary feelings. Arnold further writes :

The Poet, then, has in the first place to select an excellent action; and what actions are the most excellent? Those, certainly, which most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections : to those elementary feelings which ~~subsist~~ permanently in the race, and which are independent of time. These feelings are permanent and the same; that which interests them is permanent and the same also. The modernness or antiquity of an action, therefore, has nothing to do with its fitness for poetical representation; this depends upon its

inherent qualities. To the elementary part of our nature, to our passions, that which is great and passionate is eternally interesting; and interesting solely in proportion to its greatness and to its passion. A great human action of a thousand years ago is more interesting to it than a smaller human action of to-day, even though upon the may have been expended, and though it has the advantage of appealing by its modern language, familiar manner, and contemporary allusions, to all our transient feelings and interests. These, however, have no right to demand of a poetical work that it shall satisfy them; their claims are to be directed elsewhere. Poetical works belong to the domain of our permanent passion : let them interest these, and the voice of all subordinate claims upon them is at once silenced.⁶

Arnold cites the examples of Achilles, Prometheus, Clytemnestra, Dido - where the action is greater, the personages nobler and the situation more intense and the same according to Arnold is the true basis of the interest in a poetical work.

Arnold states in his 'Preface' to the poems of 1853 :

The date of an action, then, signifies nothing : the action itself, its selection and construction, this is what is all-important. This the Greeks understood far more clearly than we do. The radical difference between their poetical theory and ours consists, as it appears to me, in this : that, with them, the poetical character of the action in itself, and the conduct of it, was the first consideration; with us, attention is fixed mainly on the value of the separate thoughts and images which occur in the treatment of an action. They regarded the whole; we regard the parts. With them the action predominated over the expression of it; with us, the expression predominates over the action.⁷

In this way, Arnold was of the opinion that poetry should deal with human actions not with human passions in an impersonal and objective manner. The actions chosen should be powerful enough to appeal to the great primary human affections.

Arnold's Concept of Poetical Situations :

Arnold in his, preface to poems of 1853, explains his concept of poetical situations. He writes :

They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something monotonous. When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also.⁸

That's why, Arnold had withdrawn his poem 'Empedocles on Etna' from the circulation. There was a little action. The hero suffered, brooded and brooded over his suffering and finally committed suicide. His suffering didn't issue out in action, and therefore, it was not a fit subject for poetry. More subjectivity, the inner gloom or melancholy of the poet, morbid pre-occupation with thought, to the neglect of action can never result in great poetry.

Arnold adds "the more tragic the situation, the deeper becomes the enjoyment; and the situation, is more tragic in proportion as it becomes more terrible".

Subjects for Poetry :

Arnold had a considered view of what^a poet should attempt and what he should avoid. Arnold gives an idea of subject matter for poetry accordingly. In his letter to Jane Arnold writes :

At Oxford particularly many complain that the subjects treated (in the strayed Reveller and other poems) do not interest them. But as I feel rather as a reformer in poetical matter, I am glad of this opposition. If I have health and opportunity to go on, I will shake the present methods until they go down, see if I don't.⁹

It shows Arnold's awareness regarding the subject matter of poetry.

In his 'preface to poems of 1853, Arnold expresses his views on subject matter for poetry. According to Arnold the view expressed by an intelligent critic is completely false. The critic writes :

The Poet who would really fix the public attention must leave the exhausted past, and draw his subjects from matters of present important, and therefore, both of interest and novelty.¹⁰

In this way, Arnold's classicism is again seen when he points out that it is wrong to suppose that the modern poets should choose modern subjects. Modern subjects will not do, for in the modern age there was too much phillistinism or vulgarisation of values as a result of the

advance of science. Nirmaljeet Oberoi explains :

Arnold was against the doctrine of the Spasmodic's that the ancient subjects belonged to antiquity and a modern poet should deal with a modern subject. Arnold was aware that the germs of Americanism, Barbarianism, and Philistinism had polluted the Victorian society and literature. Therefore, to cure the disease of modernism the poet should take precautions against the trivial subjects and follow something grand which is available only in the literature of the past, and especially in the Greek literature. Only a sound subject matter can follow a grand style. The Spasmodic's also believed that the inferiority of subject can be hidden by the superiority of the expression. But according to Greeks and Arnold, matter and manner both should be excellent as no amount of make up can hide the ugliness beneath.¹¹

In this way, Arnold's plea for ancient subjects, subjects such as were the choice of Homer and Greek masters. The character of the subject chosen is all important, Arnold writes :

All depends upon the subject; choose a fitting action, penetrate yourself with the feeling of its situations; this done, everything else will follow.¹²

According to Arnold Shakespeare is the supreme model for English writers. He is so because :

Shakespeare indeed chose excellent subjects; the world could afford no better than Macbeth, or Romeo and Juliet, or Othello : he had no theory respecting the necessity of choosing subjects of present import, or the paramount interest attaching to allegories of the state of one's own mind; like all great poets, he knew well what constituted a poetical action; like them, wherever he found such an action, he took it; like them, too, he found his best in past times.¹³

According to Arnold in the choice of poetic subjects, the date of action signifies nothing. The nature of subject signifies everything. This theory explains the aptness of his own choice of the subject of 'Sohrab and Rustum'. Here the date of action doesn't matter, the action matters, whereas in 'Balder Dead', there is a action having little human interest and the characterless.

Moreover, in 'An Advertisement to the Second Edition of the Poems (1853)' Arnold explained his concept of subject of poetry, against which most critics raised their hands. Arnold writes :

It has been said that I wish to limit the Poet in his choice of subjects to the period of Greek and Roman antiquity : but it is not so : I only counsel him to choose for his subjects great actions, without regarding to what time they belong. Nor do I deny that the poetic faculty can and does manifest itself in treating the most trifling action, the most hopeless subject. But it is a pity that power should be waste; and that the Poet should be compelled to impart interest and force to his subject, instead of receiving them from it, and thereby doubling his impressiveness.¹⁴

In this way the subjects for poetry, which are of perennial interest deal primarily with excellent human actions. Poets with all their artistic ability cannot make subjects of inferior action interesting.

Manner and Style :

Further, Arnold is classic in his views on the manner and style of poetry. According to him it is wrong to suppose that the inferiority of subject can be covered by superior treatment. No amount of embellishment and decoration, no excellence of simile and metaphor, can for long hide the inferiority of substance. No unworthy subject can be made delightful by an excellent treatment. Highest poetry and poetic pleasure result treatment. Highest poetry and poetic pleasure result poem the whole; and not from separate parts, from the harmony of manner and matter, and not from manner alone. In order to derive highest poetic pleasure, human actions possessing an inherent interest in themselves which are to be communicated in an interesting manner by the art of the poet. He writes :

This the Greeks understood far more clearly than we do. The radical difference between their poetical theory and ours consists, as it appears to me, in this : that, with them, the poetical character of the action in itself, and the conduct of it, was the first consideration; with us, attention is fixed mainly on the value of the separate thoughts and images which occur in the treatment of an action. They regarded the whole; we regard the parts. With them the action predominated over the expression of it. with us, the expression predominates over the action. Not that they failed in expression, or were inattentive to it; on the contrary, they are the highest models of expression, the unapproached masters of the grand style : but their expression is so excellent because it is so admirably kept in its right degree of prominence.¹⁵

Therefore, expression cannot take place of action, which is the first consideration of poetry. Expression is itself dependent for its effectiveness on the excellence of the action. The subject or action should be excellent and the treatment of it should be severe and simple as it is in the ancient classics. Arnold elaborates his idea of manner. He says :

A great human action of a thousand years ago is more interesting to it than a smaller human action of to-day, even though upon the representation of this last the most consummate skill may have been expended, and though it has the advantage of appealing by its modern language, familiar manners, and contemporary allusions, to all our transient feelings and interest, These, however, have no right to demand of a poetical work that it shall satisfy them.¹⁶

In this connection George Saintsbury explains :

That all depends "had been said often enough before; but it had not been said by any one who had the whole literature before him, and the tendency for a half a century distinctly - for a full century more or less - had been so unsay or gainsay it. Further, the critic has combined with the new classic adoration of the 'fable', 'Something, perhaps, traceable, as hinted above, to the Wordsworthian horror of poetic diction, a sort of cult of baldness instead of beauty, and a distrust, if not horror, of expression'. In fact he is taking up a position of direct and as it were, designed antagonism to Dryden's in that remarkable preface to 'An Evening's Love', where he says plainly ' the story is the least part, and declares that of the important part is workmanship.¹⁷

Arnold defines poetry as "a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty". He means poetry will follow the principles of poetic truth and poetic beauty. By poetic beauty Arnold means expression. Matter and expression, form and content should go hand in hand.

Grand Style :

Arnold's classicism is seen in his view on the grand style. According to Arnold, the ancient Greeks were the unapproached masters of the grand style. Arnold expressed his views on the grand style in his 'preface to poems of 1853' and his 'lectures on translating Homer', Arnold writes :

They regarded the whole; we regard the parts. With them, the action predominated over the expression of it; with us, the expression predominates over the action. Not that they failed in expression, or were inattentive to it; on the contrary, they are the highest models of expression, the unapproached masters of the grand style : but their expression is so excellent because it is so admirably kept in its right degree of prominence; because it is so simple and so well subordinated; because it draws its force directly from the pregnancy of the matter which it conveys.¹⁸

In the opinion of Arnold, the grand style enobles poetry and enobles life. It arises in poetry, "when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with severity a serious subject".¹⁹

Arnold has a distinct preference for Homer's simple grand style since it is more magical, more disinterested. Arnold writes :

Therefore, I say, the translator of Homer should penetrate himself with a sense of the plainness and directness of Homer's style; of the simplicity with which Homer's style; of the simplicity with which Homer's thought is evolved and expressed.²⁰

Moreover, Arnold praises Homer,

And yet, in spite of this perfect plainness and directness of Homer's style, in spite of this perfect plainness and directness of his ideas, he is eminently noble; he works as entirely in the grand style, he is as grandiose, as Phidias, or Dante, or Michael Angelo.²¹

Arnold discusses the importance to plainness and directness of style, he says :

A perfectly plain direct style can of course convey the simplest matter as naturally as the grandest; indeed, it must be harder for it, one would say, to convey a grand matter worthily and nobly, than to convey a common matter, as alone such a matter should be conveyed, plainly and simply.²²

According to Arnold, there are some requirements for the grand style. There must be nobility of soul, for great words issue only from great minds. The subject or action chosen must be serious enough. It must have truth of substance and high seriousness. The treatment must be severe and simple. It must be simple like the style of Homer or

severe like that of Milton. In this way, Homer, Dante and Milton were the master of style, but other English poets like Keats lack this quality. They have short passages and single line of admitted excellence, but not the beauty of the whole. But it is the total impression which counts and which is conducive to the grand style. Therefore, we must take the ancient classics as our models, for our matter and manner.

Thus, in Arnold's view, only a poetry modelled on the ancients can serve as an antidote to contemporary phillistinism, Americanism. Indeed, Arnold's theory and poetry is to be understood as a counterblast to Romantic individualism, subjectivity and contempt for authority. Arnold finds rapidity, nobility, plainness and directness in the writing of Homer, Dante and Milton. These are the qualities of the grand style.

Exalted Conception of Poetry :

Arnold has a high conception of his own calling, he is confident that good poetry has an " Immense future. It is so because poetry is capable of higher uses. Its main function is to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. It is in, where it is worthy of its high destinies, occurs, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. Without poetry our science will appear

incomplete and most of what passes with us for Religion and Philosophy will be replaced by poetry". Arnold expresses his views on poetry in 'The Study of Poetry'. He says:

But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches is emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry.²³

Thus Arnold lays great emphasis on application of ideas to life. The ideas are beyond time and space and poetry is mainly concerned with them and hence it is also something permanent. Arnold in his 'The study of poetry', speaks highly of poetry. He says :

But if we conceive thus highly of the destinies of poetry, we must also set our standard for poetry high, since poetry, to be capable of fulfilling such high destinies, must be poetry of high order of excellence.²⁴

In this way, while reading poetry constantly a sense for the best, the really excellent, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it should be present in our mind and should govern our estimate of what we read.

That Arnold conceives poetry high is seen in his statement :

In poetry, as criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty, the spirit of our race will find, we have said, as time goes on

and as other helps fail, its consolation and stay. But the consolation and stay will be of power in proportion to the power of the criticism of life. And the criticism of life will be of power in proportion as the poetry conveying it is excellent rather than inferior, sound rather than unsound or half-sound, true rather than untrue of half-true.

The best poetry is what we want; the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can. A clearer, deeper sense of the best in poetry, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, is the most precious benefit which we can gather from a poetical collection such as the present.²⁵

In his essay on 'Wordsworth' Arnold writes :

Poetry is nothing less than the most perfect speech of man, that in which he comes nearest to being able to utter the truth. It is no small thing, therefore, to succeed eminently in poetry. And so much is required for duly estimating success here, that about poetry it is perhaps hardest to arrive at a sure general verdict, and takes longest.²⁶

Moreover, Arnold defines poetry as a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. This definition occurs in many of his essays like 'The Study of Poetry', 'Essay on Byron', 'Essay on Wordsworth and Essay on Joubert'. In his 'Essay on Wordsworth', Arnold discusses moral approach to poetry. He says :

A poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is poetry of indifference towards life.²⁷

Thus, Arnold has a high conception of poetry and expresses his faith in the power of poetry.

The Ancients as Safe Models :

Arnold in his 'Preface to the poems of 1853', considers the problems of suitable guide or model and concludes that it is only the ancients, who can be safely followed. Shakespeare for Arnold is not a safe model though he has excellent subject, he is unable 'to say a thing plainly even when the press of action demands the very directest language'. He has not the severe and scrupulous self restraint of ancients. He has not the purity of method of ancients. Then, the ancients are the best models of instruction, for the individual writer. Arnold states the reasons :

Three things which it is vitally important for him to know :- the all importance of the choice of a subject; the necessity of accurate construction; and the subordinate character of expression. He will learn from them how unspeakably superior is the effect of the one moral impression left by a great action treated as a whole, to the effect produced by the most striking single thought or by the happiest image. As he penetrates into the spirit of the great classical works, as he becomes gradually aware of their intense significance, their noble simplicity, and their calm pathos, he will be convinced that it is this effect, unity and profoundness of moral impression, at which the ancient Poets aimed.²⁸

Arnold suggests to the individual who wishes to practice any art that :

they remember the plain and simple proceedings of the old artists, who attained their grand results by penetrating themselves with some noble and significant action, not by inflating themselves with a belief in the preeminent importance and greatness of their own times. They do not talk of their mission, nor of interpreting their age, nor of the coming Poet; all this, they know, is the mere delirium of vanity; their business is not to praise their age, but to afford to the men who live in it the highest pleasure which they are capable of feeling.²⁹

Touchstone Method :

Arnold in his 'The study of poetry', introduces his 'touchstone method' to judge the intrinsic value of poetry. Arnold says :

Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as touchstone to other poetry.³⁰

This method has been advocated because he was against abstract criticism. Asked : what are the qualities of great poetry, he refused to give an answer in abstract terminology.

The characters of a high quality of poetry are what is expressed there. They are far better recognised by being felt in the verse of the master, than by being perused in the prose of the critic.³¹

It means ' that the substance and matter of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing, in an eminent degree truth and seriousness'.

"Where these concrete examples are to be picked up from? From the established classics, from the poetry of the great master, from Dante, from Shakespeare, from Homer, from Milton". In the study of poetry, Arnold quotes certain lines of great masters and argues that these few lines,

if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality.³²

"Short passages, even single lines from these great masters serve our purpose admirably well. The lines of passages that he picks up differ from one another widely, he acknowledges; but he points out that they have in common one thing; the possession of the very highest poetical quality".

Poetry as "a Criticism of Life"

Arnold defined poetry as "a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty". In order to emphasize his point Arnold has spoken of poetry as 'a criticism of life' in his essays on 'Wordsworth', 'Joubert', 'Byron' and 'The Study

of Poetry'. Arnold himself explains criticism of life as 'the noble and profound application of ideas to life'. He also explains 'the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty as truth and seriousness of substance and matter', and felicity and perfection of diction and manner. Arnold believes that poetry does not present life as it is rather the poet adds something to it from his noble nature and this something contributes to the criticism of life. Poetry makes men moral, better and nobler, but it does so not through direct teaching, or by appealing to reason like science, but by appeal in to the soul, to the whole of man. The poet gives in his poetry what he really and seriously believes in, he speaks from the depths of his soul and speaks it so beautifully that he creates a thing of beauty, and so perennial source of joy. Such high poetry makes life richer, and has the power of "sustaining and delighting us, as nothing else can". It answers to the question, "How to live?", but it does so indirectly, by conforming to the ideal of truth and goodness and thus by uplifting and enobling the soul. Arnold is against direct moral teaching. He regards didactic poetry as the lowest.

In this was, Arnold was a poet turned critic who derived his theory of poetry from the thinkers of the past. Prof. Williams says :

"Arnold's theory of poetry is based on the thinkers of the past, and chiefly Aristotle, Goethe and Wordsworth, and he wrote poems in a definite illustration of his theory"³³.

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